Wallin, Michael


# COMING UP!

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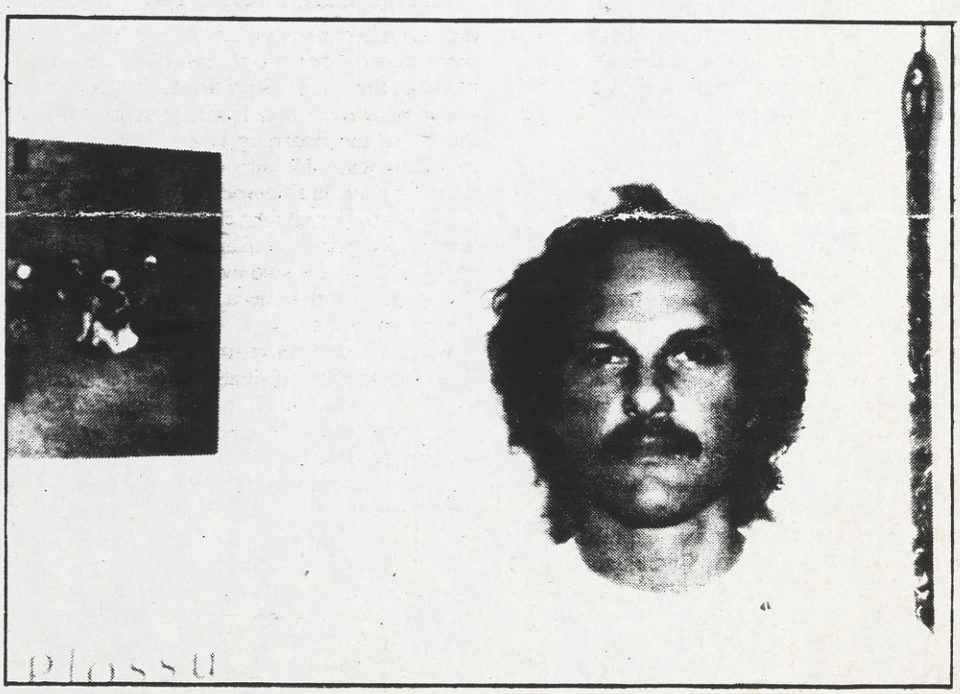
## The Films of Michael Wallin: A Review

REVIEWED BY JERRY TARTAGLIA

If lesbians and gays have anything to learn from American Teleculture (Hollywood movies and Television), it may be that the conventional moving image art forms attempt to direct our emotional responses. As an actor-president Ronald Reagan has been an adept at this technique. Whenever he smacks his parched lips, cocks his head to screen right, and gurgles, "Well..." Reagan is providing his TV audience with a series of visual and audial codes intended to convey the image of "the



*Filmmaker Michael Wallin*

wise old man, telling the plain truth." Such patterns of sounds, gestures and images form the basis of the oftentimes unconscious rituals of daily life which we learn to enact from the moving image art forms.

American males are taught a very specific kind of pattern, and in his new personal film, *Decodings*, gay filmmaker Michael Wallin attempts to deconstruct these male rituals and the images of male interaction. This film was premiered at the Second New York Lesbian and Gay Experimental Film Festival in September; and last month Wallin presented it during his one-person show at the San Francisco Cinematheque. *Decodings* (1988, 15 min, B&W/Sound) consists of images which Wallin collected from educational, newsreel, documentary and science films of the forties, fifties, and sixties. He recombined the images into a new montage, and by isolating the visual activities of males, he liberated the images from their original "coded" content. The soundtrack, written by Michael Blumlein, consisted of a series of very emotionally moving narratives which inevitably wrenched the "meanings" of the images in the found footage into a new context.

One audial sequence, for example, told of a tribe of desert-dwelling men who grew younger and younger, until they eventually became seeds and then pure thought — while their mutual collective love provided hope for others. This story was being told by a Marine. The narrator asked the Marine to drop his pants, and he said, he did, and he blew him.

Obviously this is not the kind of thought and image sequence which can be found in the average American Teleculture movie. Wallin is attempting to "decode" the imagic barriers to male intimacy and he succeeds through the depth and variety of feelings which he generates in *Decodings*. He described the film as a "psychosexual self portrait," and as such, it is a living document of an Ameircan gay identity. It isn't intended to prove to the great unwashed heterosexual public that gay men are just like everyone else. Instead, Michael Wallin helps us examine consciousness through his camera and aims toward truth rather than toward image.

It reminded me of Abigail Child's 1984 film *Covert Action*, which was finally shown in this year's San Francisco Lesbian and Gay Film Festival. Both films use found footage; both deal with the deconstruction of the language of human gesture, and both films point toward the erotic "codings" in the moving image. Michael's film, however, touched my heart and sparked an emotional response in me, whereas Child's film set me thinking about gesture and human interrelationship.

Another of other works in the program at Cinematheque revealed his roots as a personal, experimental flimmaker. *Sleepwalk* (1973, 12min, color/sound) was conceptually related to *Decodings*, in that this earlier film explores gesture and idiosyncratic human movements, especially among the filmmaker's friends. He shot these images himself, then manipulated them through the optical printer, to repeat the gestures, or slow down the movements. I enjoyed this film because it was short, well paced, and created an intimate and lovely portrait of the relationship between the filmmaker-as-camera and his friends.

Wallin's *Monitoring the Unstable Earth* (1980, 20min, color/sound) was the least enjoyable film on the program. He tried to create an awareness of "being present" while visually detaching the viewer from the land and cityscape images. In this film, Wallin's camera was noticeably felt as an obstacle between viewer and image. Unfortunately, alienation does not stimulate the act of seeing. In American experimental cinema, the landscape genre enjoyed a brief flowering in the seventies, and in my opinion, Michael Snow's *La Region Centrale* was among the earliest and best of the lot. Michael Wallin's art, on the other hand, is vivified by his emotionally conscious vision. He would do well to leave the alienated structuralist methods to the academic filmmakers who spend their lives in classrooms. Michael Wallin is thankfully too heart felt an artist to succeed at that type of boredom.

The earliest film on the program was called *Tall Grass* (1968, 12min, color/silent). He shot it as a *homage* to his friend and teacher, Bruce Baillie, using regular 8mm and blowing it up to 16mm on the optical printer. The film showed its age as the camera went on an innocent romp with his friends in the hills of Mendocino County. Many of the early experimental film techniques are used: multiple exposures, short shots, rapid jarring pans. But *Tall Grass* was fun to watch because, owing to the compact size of the 8mm camera, the viewer felt the subjective movement as if we were part of the filmmaker's body. This technique turns up in many experimental films. Sometimes, as in Barbara Hammer's works *Pond and Waterfall* (1982) and *Parisian Blinds* (1984) it is consciously employed as a shooting strategy: the camera becomes an extension of the body. Lesbian and gay film artists like Barbara Hammer and Michael Wallin, when they use the camera as an extension of the body rather than as a vehicle interposed *between* self and world, are reflecting the gay person's potential for connection between self and other.

Another emotionally revealing film in Michael's show was *Along the Way* (1983, 20 min, color/sound). Wallin seems to have conceived of this film with some of the formalist strategies in mind which he used in *Monitoring the Unstable Earth*. The difference here comes from a healthy breaking through of emotional content in combination with structural awareness. In this film we don't sense that he is "trying to create a landscape film." Instead, he allows the landscape to be enhanced by human emotion, and to my eye, that makes it more of a diary film. Apparently he made the film during a break-up with his lover and some of the images are reminiscences of desire or lingering pain.

Michael Wallin has been a filmmaker for twenty years. Last month he was a recipient of the James D. Phelan Award, presented to native California filmmakers. He is probably best known for his 1975 film, *The Place Between Our Bodies*, which was a sexual and psychological portrait of male lovers. Like most lesbian and gay personal filmmakers, his work has been largely ignored by both the straight experimental film establishment and the gay feature film festival circuit. Hopefully this trend is changing as our community slowly comes to understand the value of our own lesbian and gay artists. We need to see more films like those of Michael Wallin because his work is both pleasant to watch, and also instructive. His films help us to understand the ways in which coded messages are transmitted to us through movies.

Coming up this month at Cinematheque on November 10th is James Broughton's 75th birthday show featuring films by him and his lover, Joel Singer.